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SUBJECT: POLICE CONFIRM MURDER OF BISHOP RAMENTO NOT
POLITICALLY MOTIVATED

REF: MANILA 4359

¶1. Philippine National Police (PNP) official Henry Libay confirmed that the widely reported murder of Tarlac City Aglipayan Bishop Alberto Ramento on October 3 was not politically motivated; but rather a case of robbery/homicide.

Libay also confirmed that the PNP arrested four members of the "Magic Group," a criminal gang based in the Tarlac area, on October 19 and charged them with the Bishop's murder. Embassy confirmed with the provincial court in Tarlac City that a case has been filed against the four members.

¶2. According to media reports, members of the Bishop's family, leftist lawmakers, and human rights NGOs are blaming the Arroyo administration for Bishop Ramento's killing, but the PNP is standing firm in its assessment that the murder was the work of common criminals.

¶3. Tarlac Police Chief Nicanor Bartolome said the Bishop was probably murdered while trying to stop the four suspects from prying open the church safe. Bartolome said the motive "was plain and simple robbery." PNP Chief Oscar Calderon also discounted a political motive, adding, "it is our duty as police officers to present the case based on evidence."

¶4. In an interview with web newscaster INQ7.net, retired Supreme Court Justice Jose Melo, chair of the independent commission created by President Arroyo to investigate the recent wave of extrajudicial killings (ref), stated that his commission is not bound by the findings of the PNP, and said that if the family of Bishop Ramento is not satisfied with PNP actions taken in the case, "(the Melo Commission) is willing to hear their side so we can further investigate the case."

KENNEY